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An Often-Tumultuous Saga of Books and Book-Places in the World: A Review



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Battles, Matthew. *Library: An Unquiet History*. W.W. Norton, New York, NY, 2003. \$24.95.

In this sweeping view of library history, Harvard librarian Matthew Battles provides a beautifully written story of the often-tumultuous saga of books and book-places in the world. Written first as an essay published in *Harper's*; this study grew into a book-length treatment, an admirable overview of the large issues facing libraries over the past couple of thousand years.

The author draws liberally from a host of sources, relying repeatedly on his experiences from years of working at Harvard University as an archivist. The story of how libraries have evolved to the current state of organized chaos is interesting indeed. The problem can be recognized by walking into the maze-like, labyrinth of the modern research library, not unlike Harvard's 90-plus libraries with collections so vast and impenetrable that the Myth of Sisyphus becomes an appropriate model for those who would try to comprehend all of the information. These collections are staggering, though libraries, as Battles explains in detail, were not always like what we now know as a library.

Library: An Unquiet History chronicles the library at Alexandria, as well as many other libraries of antiquity, emphasizing the struggles to stave off fire and destruction, both natural and human-spurred. It covers the development of books in various forms, and the changing role of the library catalog in the overall scheme of library evolution. There are many engaging, albeit sometimes disgusting, stories of the library as a tool of the police state: author Richard Wright's now infamous journey into the white-only southern libraries of his youth in the Jim Crow South, is one example.

The last century alone witnessed the destruction of 100 million books, for chiefly political reasons. And this is an ongoing theme throughout the narrative. Another theme besides book burning is the ideological shaping of libraries as pawns for political purpose, the purveyors of propaganda. Both were present in Hitler's regime.

One riveting section of *Library* deals with the Nazi's censorship of books, and another section recalls author Alfred Kazin's decent into the bowels of beauty and books in New York Public Library circa 1929. Both stories are equally engaging, both profound for very different reasons. The Nazis tried to censor and to shape German reading. Kazin, an American Jew, did his best during the same period of World history, to drink deeply from a free-flowing font of books and ideas in New York.

There are other problems that this study shows, perhaps by implication. First, Matthew Battles, a librarian, is also a public intellectual. His words register because they are well thought out and based upon a long tradition of research and synthesis in academe, but not seen often enough among professionals called librarians. Battles has plenty to say about history, the book, libraries, librarians, and the uncommon way in which these four have evolved together. Indeed, this kind of book is relevant beyond its value for mere bibliophile entertainment. As graduate library schools continue to close at an alarming rate and as libraries and library managers undergo seismic shifts in mission and self-identity, one way to address the many crises in librarianship is to reacquaint those of us who work in libraries, as well as patrons who love the libraries, with the long-term significance of the book and the library in human history.

The second real significance of this book is the vivid portrait painted of book-burning over millennia. In essence, the totalitarianists know to strike the mind when attempting to mold, or even obliterate a culture or an idea, whether during the Nazi atrocities in Europe or with our current "Library Snooping Act" (the U.S.A. Patriot Act). Though the U.S.A. Patriot Act is no moral equivalent to the Nazi atrocities by any means, ultimately, monitoring one's reading, secretly no doubt, is but one step away from closing the doors to the library itself, shutting the gate to the best of things librarians and libraries stand for. It is an attempt at policing the mind. Do not be mistaken: those who desire to police the mind will also police the body soon enough.

There are additional works of value to be read along with *Library: An Unquiet History*, Lionel Casson's *Libraries in the Ancient World* and Fred Lerner's *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age*, among others. All of this said, *Library: An Unquiet History* is a rare gem. If the American Library Association cared much about the future of librarianship, it would buy every student in an ALA accredited school a copy of this book, and it would also make an effort to see that students actually read and discuss the work.

Library: An Unquiet History dignifies the work of librarians as a profession, something needed more now than ever before, as we encounter this chaotic Communication Age. It tells us why we are here toiling in the library by telling us how we arrived as keepers of books and guardians of democracy.

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